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Haverinen, Soili Kaarina

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Trinity, Embodiment and Gender

SOILI HAVERINEN

Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT

This article will scrutinize the approaches of Janet Martin Soskice and Gavin D'Costa to the Trinity, embodiment and gender. It argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with embodiment, and assesses Soskice's and D'Costa's answers to gender-related questions that have arisen from the connection between embodiment and the Trinity. The aim of the article is firstly to prove that orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity are not essentially exclusive to women, and secondly that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model by which to understand sexual difference at the human level.

KEYWORDS

Trinity, incarnation, embodiment, gender, feminist theology, difference, sexual difference, relational subjectivity

INTRODUCTION

What do embodiment and the Trinity have to do with each other? The doctrine of the Trinity is often seen as the most abstract doctrine in Christian dogma, a doctrine that transcends not only our physical reality but our rationality as well. In the present article, however, I shall argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is closely connected with embodiment, by drawing on the work of Janet Martin Soskice, Professor of Philosophical Theology at the Uni-

versity of Cambridge and fellow of Jesus College, and Gavin D'Costa, Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Bristol. Furthermore, I shall assess their answers to gender-related questions that have arisen as a result of connecting the Trinity with embodiment.

Common to Soskice and D'Costa is their view that the Trinitarian approach is essential to contemporary assessments of embodiment in a Christian context. Soskice emphasizes that the connection between embodiment and the Trinity was already very close when the doctrine was first articulated. At the time, the need for a specific doctrinal formulation was practical rather than theoretical. It arose from the belief in God's incarnation, i.e. from the conviction that God was embodied as an individual person in Jesus Christ, as well as from the practical and pastoral questions that the early Church associated with this belief. The doctrine of the Trinity was a response to the problem of how it is possible to simultaneously believe that there is only one God, and that Jesus truly is God in a human body. She clarifies the process as follows: 'The means, the tools at hand, were those of a Greek philosophy but the motives were pastoral and apologetic. The doctrine of the Trinity adds nothing extra to the basic Christian confession.'¹

Although the notion of embodiment had already played an essential role from early on, gender-related questions concerning the Trinity and embodiment did not arise until contemporary theology got underway in tandem with feminist approaches. Common questions posed by contemporary feminists include the following. 'If God is embodied as a male, what have women to do with him? Are men essentially closer to God and are women excluded from divinity due to their gender?' Or, expressed metaphysically: 'How is the gendered state of human being as *Imago Dei* related to God, and what is the relation between sexual difference at the human level and gender-related imagery in religious language?'²

My aim is to prove firstly that from orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity it is possible to find answers to these questions that are not exclusive to women (or men), and secondly that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model by which to understand sexual difference at the

¹ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' in: Susan Frank Parsons (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge 2002), 135–150, esp. 136.

² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 138–139. Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York 1992), 18. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston 1973), 19. Pamela Sue Anderson, 'Feminist Theology as Philosophy of Religion,' in: Parsons (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 40–57, esp. 42.

human level. Both Soskice and D'Costa reflect on these questions, striving to take the feminist challenge seriously, and to answer them from within the Christian, mostly Roman-Catholic, tradition.

INCLUSION WITHOUT FEMALE DIVINITY

The French feminist Luce Irigaray formulates the feminist criticism of the Christian concept of the Trinity in terms of exclusive maleness in the following way:

Christianity tells us that God is in three persons, three manifestations, and that the third stage of the manifestation occurs as a wedding between the spirit and the bride. Is this supposed to inaugurate the divine for, in, with women? The female? Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine... There is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit.³

Irigaray demands that there be a female god and finds a possible candidate in the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit. She is not entirely alone here, for in early Syriac tradition the Spirit had been styled as feminine, because the gender of this noun in Semitic languages is female – *ruha* in Syriac and *ruâh* in Hebrew. However, her motive for feminizing the Spirit is not historical or linguistic but rather ideological.⁴ She suggests that God's incarnation in Jesus Christ should be understood only as a partial incarnation and that the feminine spirit following him had made the incarnation complete. Only in that way would the Godhead include femininity and provide possibility of subjectivity for women.⁵

Gavin D'Costa accepts Irigaray's challenge and offers two compatible solutions to the problem she presents. In both, he rejects Irigaray's demand by highlighting that God's incarnation should not be understood as an exclusion of women even though God was incarnated as a man. First, God in fact did not only utilize Christ's male body as the instrument of salvation but the female

³ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* transl. Gillian C. Gill (New York 1993), 62.

⁴ Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford 2007), 112. Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 143–144. Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London 2000), 43–45.

⁵ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 8.

body of Christ's mother Mary as well. The physical motherhood of Mary thus proves that femininity cannot be contrary to divinity. Secondly, he partly agrees with Irigaray's argument that God's incarnation as the individual male Jesus Christ could be understood as an incomplete incarnation.⁶

D'Costa, however, rejects Irigaray's view that the incarnation was completed only in the incarnation of a female spirit, because that would assign sexual difference within the Trinity. Instead, the incarnation was completed only in the life of Jesus' resurrected body – the Marian church – which is additionally depicted as the body of Christ and as his bride. This 'Church-body' has been described as a female body throughout history and will not be complete until the *eschaton*. Every member – female and male – of the Church, the body of Christ, is a part of the salvific act of the Trinity. According to D'Costa, as members of Christ's body, members of the Church are also co-redeemers with Christ, as is Mary, the first Co-Redeemer. In spite of Irigaray's criticism of this model, women are not excluded, but have their own subjectivity by participating in the Trinitarian life as members of Christ's body, without having, however, a sovereign subjectivity. We shall shortly return to the concept of subjectivity later in this article.⁷

D'Costa also criticized Irigaray's call for feminine divinity, that her model would actually essentialize sexual difference in a way that would be alien to the Christian understanding of both man and woman being created in the image of each person of the Trinity. D'Costa as well as Soskice reject any attempt to assign sexual difference to the Trinity. They both emphasize that God is beyond human gender-limits, in other words he does not lack gender, but surpasses it, and therefore each of the three persons can be described with both male and female imagery. Furthermore, they both remark that in the previously mentioned Syriac tradition the Spirit was considered to be inferior to the Father and Son, and therefore feminine. This view is in contradiction with feminist purposes as well as orthodox understandings of the Trinity.⁸

D'Costa asserts that in assigning gender to the divine *per se*, Christianity is in danger of idolatry, that is, of univocally assigning qualities from the created world to God. He writes: 'Analogy reminds us that any likeness that indeed exists always does so within a greater unlikeness and difference. To

⁶ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 38–39.

⁷ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 38–39.

⁸ Gavin D'Costa, 'Queer Trinity,' in Gerald Loughlin (ed.), *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body* (Oxford 2007), p.269–280, esp. 273–274. Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 144.

forget this is to be idolatrous and anthropomorphic.’⁹ He suggests that ‘it is in the relationship between gendered difference, not in gender itself, that we find the analogical bridge to the Trinitarian God.’¹⁰

Even Christians from other – non-Catholic – denominations, like myself, may find D’Costa’s points fruitful and worth considering. Although the role of Mary and appealing to Marian dogmas may sound alien, his argument about being members of Christ’s body is not far removed from the Lutheran dogma of common priesthood, for example. However, Lutherans would probably not talk about co-redeemers, but rather co-workers, or they would not say that Christ’s incarnation was incomplete. Yet they could agree with D’Costa that men and women are members of the same body, the body of Christ and his Church-bride. According to this understanding, sexual difference does not subvert common humanity but is compatible with it. The work of the Holy Spirit in the Church demonstrates the inclusion of both men and women in union with God. And this union is performed bodily in the sacraments, in prayer, and in the Church’s proclamation that repeats the unique event of incarnation like an echo.

Further, Irigaray calls for a female god in order to establish the autonomy and subjectivity of women. In other words, she wishes to change some divine attributes on account of her feminist purposes. But since God is by definition a necessary being, the prime cause and mover of all existence who himself has no cause, would a god whose attributes are defined according to certain needs of certain people be God at all, or rather an idol? God has the desired influence upon culture, societies and the subjectivity of individuals solely as *God*, as an omnipotent, good, necessary and personal being. By changing the reference to the concept, its influence would be changed as well. It is not evident that any idol could provide help in establishing the subjectivity of women. Another question is whether Irigaray’s ideal of subjectivity and autonomy is even desirable, but we shall return to this later.

HOW TO INTERPRET THE GENDERED LANGUAGE OF THE TRINITY?

While Gavin D’Costa provided an interpretation of the continuing incarnation as an answer to the feminist challenge, Janet Martin Soskice’s response

⁹ D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 43. See also D’Costa, ‘Queer Trinity,’ 270.

¹⁰ D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 61.

focuses on the interpretations of gendered imagery in Christian language. Soskice notes that questions concerning gender and the Trinity are not relevant to feminist theologians who have already cast off the basic elements of the Trinitarian doctrine in their thinking. According to her, the Trinity has essential significance only for those who have a reasonably high Christology, in other words, for those who wish to say 'Jesus is God incarnate.'¹¹

To such persons she gives four reasons for adhering to the Trinitarian doctrine despite its ostensible masculinism. First she notes that the doctrine of the Trinity protects the otherness of God from anthropomorphism. One God with three persons is infinitely different from any human being. God is not a creature, or a male, although he was incarnated as a man. 'Father' and 'Son' are not to be understood strictly in biological terms.¹²

Secondly, she sees the doctrine as defeating the main target of the feminist critique: covert monarchianism. The indifferent and distant god criticized by feminist theologians is not the God of Scripture or the Trinity but rather the god of deism.¹³ She argues that the Trinitarian God of Scripture creates from love and is present in his creation. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity describes the ways in which God is with us all the way to incarnation, adopting human flesh and dying on the cross, and present among us in the Spirit.¹⁴

Thirdly, the Trinitarian doctrine endorses the fundamental goodness and beauty of the human being through the incarnation. Jesus was true man and true God, and in him God became a fully and truly sexed human being in a real human body.¹⁵ But it is precisely this male embodiment of God that is a stumbling block for several feminists. However, if it is complicated for them to accept that God was incarnated as a man, what would the alternative be? What if God had been incarnated as a woman, but every other detail in the biblical narrative remained in place? What would change? If God had been born as a little girl from the Virgin Mary without any contribution from a man, would this alternative not be rather exclusive of men? In that case would there not be a good reason for men to complain that they have no role in God's plan? A female god would have been born as a girl with a female body

¹¹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 136–137.

¹² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 137. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 69.

¹³ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 139. See also: Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 110–111.

¹⁴ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 139.

¹⁵ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140.

from a female body, and men would have been completely unnecessary. But unlike that narrative, God, according to the Bible, employed both a female body and a male body to accomplish his salvific act, not, however, by allocating each an equal role, not by flattening sexual difference, but rather by confirming it. I think that it would be appropriate to ask whether the feminist interpretation of the exclusion of women is essentially a failure to recognize the significance of physical motherhood. In addition, D'Costa has noted that feminists probably would not accept a female incarnation either, because Jesus ended up being violated and crucified. A tortured female savior would instead be seen as affirming phallic violence against women rather than proscribing it.¹⁶

The fourth point Soskice makes relates to philosophical questions that have been articulated by postmodernists and contemporary feminists. Soskice regards the doctrine of the Trinity as challenging the 'philosophies of One' that constitute the same targets of both feminism and postmodernism. The doctrine of the Trinity moves us beyond the binarism of 'the One' and 'the other,' where 'the other' is defined only as 'not me' and thus only serves the establishment of 'the One.'¹⁷ Soskice notes that Trinitarian theology was originally formulated to counter a similar metaphysics of the One which does not allow any genuine otherness but in which the otherness is merely the 'Other of the Same.' The Trinitarian God is unity in difference and relational in himself.¹⁸ None of the three persons can be understood as separate or independent from the other two. The persons of the Trinity *are* only in relation to each other in a 'perichoretic outpouring of love.'¹⁹

Earlier in this article Luce Irigaray was quoted as calling for divine help in order to establish women's autonomy and sovereignty. In contrast to her view, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a quite different ideal for human subjectivity. As Soskice emphasizes, the persons of the Trinity exist only in relation to each other, which means that genuine subjectivity is not to be found in distant solitude and autonomy but rather in loving relations with other subjects. This ideal is quite opposite to the feminist ideal of an independent emancipated woman who could paradoxically be seen as a representation of the Cartesian ideal of subjectivity.

¹⁶ D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity*, 62.

¹⁷ Here Soskice is reflecting particularly on Simon de Beauvoir's & Luce Irigaray's thinking.

¹⁸ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 100–101.

¹⁹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 140–141.

According to Soskice, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals that 'to-be' most fully is 'to-be-related' in difference.²⁰ She refers to Augustine's *De Trinitate* where the *imago Dei* is considered to mean that human beings are created in the image of the Trinity instead of that of the Son, which is a male image. In this way Augustine rejected the implication that women were not created fully in the image of God long before feminists set out their questions on the same subject.²¹

Soskice reminds us that it is not possible to avoid masculine terminology in Christianity 'as long as the New Testament is with us.'²² In contrast to the Old Testament, 'Father' and 'Son' in the New Testament are very central divine nominations. Trying to replace the Christian language of 'God as Father' would result in a new religion.²³

Instead of replacing the language, Soskice is willing to draw attention to the reason why a gendered imagery is so crucial in biblical writings as well as in the liturgical tradition. She remarks that the gendered imagery found in the Bible mainly involves kinship titles like 'Father' and 'Son,' and concludes that the main purpose of the writers was not to emphasize sex but kinship, a close and loving relationship between God and human beings.²⁴ Furthermore, the way in which gendered nominations are usually applied rules out literal readings of the imagery. As an example, the image of God as a rock giving birth, with him being both the Father and the spouse of Israel, are rather effective in detaching the metaphor from univocal anthropomorphic interpretations.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Will these answers satisfy feminists who have been worried about the masculinism of the Trinitarian doctrine? Feminists such as Luce Irigaray who wish to find an essential establishment of human sexual difference in the sexual difference that occurs at the divine level will certainly be disappointed. The Trinitarian doctrine does not justify assigning sexual difference univocally

²⁰ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 124.

²¹ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 141.

²² Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 142.

²³ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 73.

²⁴ Soskice, 'Trinity and Feminism,' 4–5, 78.

²⁵ Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, 76, 78–79. However, she seems to disregard the fact that in the New Testament the designation 'Lord' is used about twice as often as the designation 'Father.' 'Lord' is a strong expression of authority and gender without any associations to kinship.

to the Trinity. Instead of that, a feminist could be relieved that the Trinitarian doctrine does not describe divinity as one, or three, distant divine men but rather as one God in three persons, which transcends human gender definitions. The Trinitarian God is present in his creation, especially as being born into this world – in a male body but through a female body. The Trinitarian doctrine asserts that both sexes can be employed as instruments of God's holy work and therefore neither of them as embodied beings is alien to God or excluded from union with him. The most spiritual event of the incarnation was at the same time a thoroughly bodily event. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity breaks the boundaries between spiritual and embodied reality.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the Trinitarian approach provides an intriguing model for understanding the concept of difference. The difference between the persons of the Trinity is not contrary to their unity but rather a force that draws them to each other in reciprocal love, from which the whole of creation originates. Although we cannot apply divine reality to human life univocally, it can open up for us a potential perspective in which difference is not necessarily seen as separating and alienating. Instead, some forms of difference should rather be understood as being of a connecting nature, and therefore good as such.

However, this view does not claim that all differences function this way. Some produce alienation, discrimination and oppression. Perhaps all differences are capable of engendering these conditions if misinterpreted and misused, if the goodness or likeness of God is attributed to one part of the difference and wickedness correspondingly to the other. But if God as a perfectly good being contains difference within himself, it follows that human differences, such as the sexual difference between men and women, can be considered as essentially good as well, as a part of the richness of divine self-expression. Sexual difference could be seen as a connecting force, not as discriminating but as binding humankind together through marriage and families, and producing new life. In that case rejecting sexual difference in an attempt to resist discrimination and oppression would be a mistake. A more fruitful approach would be to strengthen those interpretations of sexual difference that emphasize both sexes as an *imago Dei* of the Trinitarian God.